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Poortinga, Ype H.; Schruijer, Sandra G. L.

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Gustav Jahoda: The art and science of constructive skepticism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cap**Ype H. Poortinga**

Tilburg University, Netherlands

Sandra G.L. Schruijer

Utrecht University & Tilburg University, Netherlands

Abstract

In this essay, we consider Gustav Jahoda's contributions to empirical research and conceptual reflection in the fields of cross-cultural and social psychology. The first section draws attention to what we see as salient characteristics of his empirical research. The second section describes Jahoda's critiques of some iconic theoretical concepts and distinctions. The third section describes his historical interest in the development of the two fields, with cultural context as a focus. In the conclusion section, we mention why Jahoda's contributions need to be taken into account by current researchers and those to come.

Keywords

Gustav Jahoda, conceptualization of culture, cross-cultural psychology, experimental social psychology, historical analysis

In fact, I have exposed myself to the risk of becoming unpopular all around. (Jahoda, 1982, p. viii)

Corresponding author:

Sandra G.L. Schruijer, Utrecht University, Bijlhoutstraat 6 Utrecht, 3511 ZC Netherlands.

Email: s.g.l.schruijer@uu.nl

Empirical research

Taking the period from Gustav Jahoda's first publication that we were able to trace (Jahoda, 1949) to the last (Jahoda, 2016a, 2016b), two kinds of publications can be distinguished. In the beginning of his career, he was engaged mainly in empirical research on human behavior, including the hypothesis testing kind. Later on, he shifted more to analyses of historical developments, using archives and libraries as sources of data. Presumably, this shift had to do with his responsibilities as head of the department of psychology at the University of Strathclyde (from 1963), but especially with the unusually long period after his official retirement (in 1985) during which Gustav continued to reflect and write. Often, the topics addressed and the methods used reflect the period in which research is conducted. As we shall see, in the case of Gustav the influence of scientific fashion was limited: available methods and theories were tools for addressing interesting questions, not to determine what would make an interesting question. Also, Gustav did not restrict himself to a single discipline. His interest and expertise spanned several fields. The most focal ones are cross-cultural psychology, social psychology, and the history of ideas on what is called "culture."

We leave aside the earliest research on work attitudes of adolescents starting in the labor market, except to mention perhaps that a range of methods was used, including open interviews, sentence completion and a job attitude test (Jahoda, 1949, 1952). In 1952, with a university background in cultural anthropology and sociology as well as psychology (Deregowski, 2017), and a PhD from the University of London, Gustav accepted a position as lecturer in sociology at the University College of Ghana and turned to cross-cultural research. Cross-cultural psychology as an identifiable field of research did not exist at the time and he contributed greatly to its establishment.

An early contribution emerging from his stay in Ghana was a study on Ashanti names (Jahoda, 1954; see also Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). Apparently, among the Ashanti, a boy is given the name of the day on which he was born. The name refers to the "kra," the soul of the day, which implies a disposition towards certain behavior. Those born on Monday are supposed to be quiet and peaceful. Boys called "Wednesday" are held to be quick-tempered and aggressive. The interesting point is that Gustav tried to establish the effect of this belief by studying delinquency records in a juvenile court. A significantly lower number of convictions than expected was found for youngsters called "Monday." There was also some evidence that those called Wednesday were more likely to be convicted of crimes against other persons (e.g., fighting, assault). His conclusion was that the "correspondence appears too striking to be easily dismissed." There was an evident need for replication and extension, which never happened to the best of our knowledge. However, this study is a beautiful example, how the psychological consequences of an anthropological observation can be analyzed by drawing on a relevant source of evidence.

Another question Gustav addressed was how the local African people in Ghana, then still often called the Gold Coast, looked at white people and felt about them. This research included primary and secondary school children, students and adults, and again drew on a variety of methods: surveys, ethnographic observation (e.g., on the legislative assembly), personal observations and a historical analysis. Gustav refused to draw on specific characteristics of African people, which were fashionable at the time. He wrote:

I do not believe that it is necessary to make any assumptions about a special African personality in order to be able to account for self-images or attitudes and stereotypes concerning whites; this can be done at least broadly in terms of social influences that have shaped character and outlook. (Jahoda, 1961/1983, p. 107)

Apparently, “culture” should not be invoked for everything.

In the 1960s and 1970s research in the budding field of cross-cultural psychology had a focus on perception and cognition. Well-known is the research by Segall, Campbell, and Herskovits (1966) on visual illusions, showing that cross-cultural differences in susceptibility to such illusions are related to ecological context (e.g., the presence or absence of wide vistas in the environment). Gustav was the lead researcher in several studies (e.g., Jahoda, 1966; Jahoda, G., Cheyne, W., Derogowski, M, et al., 1976; Jahoda & McGurk, 1974); the most elegant of which was a real experiment (very rare in cross-cultural psychology). The study had to do with susceptibility to the Müller-Lyer illusion. Silvar and Pollack (1967) had found correlations of skin color with both retinal pigmentation and contour detection, suggesting a physiological variable as an alternative to Segall et al.’s experience-based explanation of cross-cultural differences in the strength of the illusion effect. Making use of the fact that pigmentation affects the transmission through the eye of blue light more than of red light, Gustav tested respondents’ illusion susceptibility for the Müller-Lyer under two conditions, namely with blue and with red stimuli. No difference between the two conditions was found for Scottish students with a light skin and presumably low retinal pigmentation, but a sample of Malawian students with dark skin was indeed significantly less susceptible to the blue stimuli (Jahoda, 1971). However, an extended replication (Jahoda, 1975) found no further support for the retinal pigmentation hypothesis. We find this research exemplary for two reasons: his anthropological orientation, to which we return later on, was no reason for Gustav to ignore physiological factors, and the manipulation of wave length of the light (blue and red) allowed for a strong design with a strict test of the hypothesis.

Critical analyses

Cross-cultural psychology

Gustav never had an exclusive focus on empirical studies; his critical mindset made him turn to methodological and conceptual issues. A fairly early example is a

paper by Frijda and Jahoda (1966), entitled: "On the scope and method of cross-cultural research." It was a solid review that made several points on what we would now call equivalence, the need to seek close intercultural cooperation with researchers in target societies rather than impose the conceptual baggage of one's own, and the need to do comparisons based on multiple populations varying along a dimension rather than on dichotomies. A point we wish to make explicitly is the criticism of a well-known scheme by John Whiting (see Whiting, B., 1963), at that time perhaps the most highly respected researcher in the field of culture and personality research. The core of the scheme is a causal sequence from maintenance system via child rearing practices to personality. Frijda and Jahoda find this scheme to be rather simplistic; the study of relationships between cultural context and personality needs to consider a much more complex array of relationships.

In retrospect, one can see the paper by Frijda and Jahoda (1966) as a stepping stone to later critical analyses of simplistic conceptual distinctions applied to inherently complex issues. Such analyses typically would draw attention to undesirable gaps in argumentation by pointing out likely alternatives, and to internal inconsistencies in arguments by pointing out consequences that the author could not possibly have intended. To us, this kind of critical analyses of celebrated concepts and distinctions is the most salient feature of Gustav's collected writings. The analyses are enjoyable to read, as they tend to be written in an elegant style, and even more so because they contain penetrating argumentation, showing aspects and consequences of ideas and concepts that the original authors had not considered, but that evidently are relevant. In short, these analyses are worth reading even if sometimes half a century old.

Probably, the most eloquent of these analyses is Gustav's discussion of the emic-etic distinction. In any case, it has been his most serious challenge to the community he most belonged to and of which he had been the President, the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP). The challenge was made in the invited key note address at its 1982 international congress. Gustav had complained before about the distinction (Jahoda, 1977), but he did not get much of an ear and apparently decided to emphasize his concerns more strongly. The title of the key note was: "The cross-cultural emperor's conceptual clothes: The emic-etic distinction revisited" (Jahoda, 1983a). Gustav writes about "the cross-cultural emperors believing that they are wearing solidly made conceptual emic-etic clothes" and argues that "if not entirely naked, they are at most dressed in ill-fitting rags" (p. 20). His extensive grasp of the literature in cultural anthropology is at the basis of his argument and he shows how there is a need in this field of science to have a general theory that can account for culture as a system. In contrast, cross-cultural psychology is mainly concerned with variables and the relationships between them. Moreover, the emic-etic terminology is used for measurement methods as well as what is being measured, leading to contradictions.

Three cross-cultural psychologists who had been the target of Gustav's objections wrote a reaction and Gustav replied to these comments (Jahoda, 1983b). We do not have the space to go into details of the arguments, but in our reading the

reactions were rather disappointing, reiterating the usefulness of the dichotomy. Overall, if we see this scientific discussion as a boxing match and ourselves as referees, it is our perception that Gustav more or less floored his opponents. Especially his comment that there is an unpretentious pair of terms less liable to create confusion, namely culture-specific versus culture-general, resembles a knock-out.¹

Probably, the sharpest of Gustav's several critical reviews concerned Moscovici's (1984) concept of social representations. Gustav acknowledges the importance of the conceptualization and what it attempts to achieve (Jahoda, 1988). In his analysis, he questions whether social representations are really that different from Durkheim's collective representations which Moscovici specifically rejected as too general and he addresses descriptions by Moscovici that do not seem consistent with each other. According to Gustav, the question is whether Moscovici does not retain the essential feature of collective representations, i.e., the notion of a "group mind." More serious are Gustav's suggestions that Moscovici is unclear about the relationship between social representations and other concepts, including culture and individual psychological processes. Here one reads about "the blurring of notions that is no mere accident" (Jahoda, 1988, p. 200) and that "the relationships between concepts are badly in need of clarification" (p. 200). As a final assertion, we may mention that in Gustav's view, there had not been a real test of the theory; unsurprisingly, as it was too loosely formulated.

As might be expected, Moscovici (1988) wrote a rebuttal. He reiterated in rather complex language his viewpoints, but as far as we can see, he hardly came up with any arguments invalidating Gustav's points. His text certainly is not a clear and crisp statement of how social representations are to be defined.² While re-reading various texts for the purpose of the present article, we asked ourselves, admittedly somewhat late, why Gustav was so outspoken. Research on social representations has further developed into a niche area in which Gustav's comments have had little impact. We also considered whether Gustav perhaps had to defend somehow his own position against the idea of social representations. We have not found any clear support for this, but we may note that Gustav had written extensively about symbolism and symbols are not too far removed from social representations.

Symbolism is fairly extensively discussed in what we see as Gustav's most distinct contribution to the literature, his book "Psychology and Anthropology: A psychological perspective" (1982). This symbolism is reflected in his account of the Bambara in Mali who distinguish 60 elements in the person that form pairs with each one male and one female element. Examples are thought and reflection, speech and authority, future and destiny, and first name and family name. Also, their rituals are packed with symbols. Bambara psychology is said to form part of a worldview in which relationships between various elements are established by symbolism rather than by analytic procedures. He refers approvingly to ethnographers' descriptions how symbolic customs across various spheres of life, such as food, and family relationships can hang together. The final chapter

of the book summarizes two themes: collective representation and symbolism; they are the bridges to link psychology and cultural anthropology, which Gustav firmly believes need to complement each other.

In our view, few of Gustav's misgivings were misplaced, even if they may not have felt pleasant for colleagues who were the target. When working on the textbook "Cross-cultural psychology: Theory and applications" (Berry et al., 2002), the authors thought it would be nice to have a foreword written by Gustav. When asked, he accepted on the condition that he could give his frank opinion, to which the authors happily agreed. The resulting text was more a review than the traditional foreword praising the qualities of a book. While clearly mentioning the positive aspects, Gustav also outlined in some detail what he saw as an important shortcoming (basically insufficient attention to culturalist approaches). These criticisms were severe enough to lead to a discussion among the authors of the Berry et al., book when they prepared the second edition, namely whether or not Gustav should be asked again for a foreword. Fortunately, in this case, principles of open communication in science trumped the egos of the authors, but it is telling that there was a discussion, even after a balanced argument with more favorable than unfavorable comments. Apparently, criticism makes an author easily unpopular, as Gustav realized (see the motto of this paper).

As we have seen, Gustav has taken issue with several conceptual idols of his time, such as the emic-etic distinction and social representations, and also individualism-collectivism was found not to be up to standard (e.g., Jahoda, 2011). We could draw a similar list on theoretical positions. Here, we could refer to his argument with Gergen (Jahoda, 1986) in which he insists that there are regularities which go beyond what constructionism can account for; to his analysis (Jahoda, 2012) of recent definitions of culture found in handbooks and textbooks of which several are found to be logically and substantively incompatible; and to his critical question whether any indigenous psychologies actually exist (Jahoda, 2016a).

Despite his extensive critical analysis of much of cross-cultural psychology and its concepts, he respectfully moved around, what in some ways may be taken as the biggest idol of all: the concept of culture (Poortinga, 2015). In his view, "the polysemy of the term 'culture' entails a certain arbitrariness, and so it can be defined differently for different purposes" (Jahoda, 2011, p. 39). In one of his papers, he refers to the "extraordinary malleability of the construct" (Jahoda, 2012, p. 299) and uses as a motto the wry statement Lewis Carroll attributed to Humpty Dumpty: "[a word] means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." Nevertheless, in line with his respect for cultural anthropology, he insists on retaining the concept of culture, because in his view, we cannot do without it. However, "students should not be presented with a rigid formula or a smorgasbord of definitions, but given some insight into the ways the concept is useful in spite of the impossibility of pinning it down" (Jahoda, 2012, p. 300).

(Experimental) social psychology

Gustav had a passion for social psychology although he considered himself to be at the periphery of it, as it excluded, to his great regret, cultural anthropology (Jahoda, 2016b). He was very much interested in social behavior yet, not surprisingly, had strong criticisms regarding the practice of social psychological research. It was especially experimental social psychology that was the focus of his criticisms as it mostly ignores the cultural context of social behavior. It was Gustav's firm conviction that social norms and values govern social behavior and therefore context needs to be incorporated in the study of all social behavior. He expressed his concerns in various articles, perhaps the best known to the social psychology community was published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, the journal of the (then called) Experimental Association of Experimental Social Psychology (Jahoda, 1986). In this article, he argues convincingly that mainstream experimental social psychology is culture-bound, although it is "masquerading as the study of nature" (p. 17). Considering social behavior as the expression of the interplay between nature and culture is not found in mainstream social psychology. There are exceptions, such as, for example, the work of Moscovici (although, as we have seen, he did not refrain from being critical of his Social Representation Theory) and the work of Tajfel. Those who only focused on culture without nature (for example discursive psychology as formulated by Potter, 2010) or those denying culture and nature (pointing to Gergen, 1982 and his social constructionism) could face Gustav's sharp and frank criticisms (Jahoda, 1986). Pursuing the formulation of universal laws, mainstream social psychology unjustifiably reduces social behavior to nature (Jahoda, 1986). Those theoretical claims that may apply across cultures are often nothing more than truisms or speculations (Jahoda, 1979). Specific research questions often end up as mini-theories in experimental social psychology (Jahoda, 2013). Gustav argues in favor of multiple social psychologies (Jahoda, 1986). For him, the main aim of social psychology is to find out which aspects of social behavior are universal and which ones vary across cultures (Jahoda, 2013).

As we have seen, early in his career, Gustav attempted to replicate experiments in an African context, but he was not successful: there was "no better luck than with psychokinesis" (Jahoda, 2016b, p. 366). In various texts, he explains that there are practical reasons why replication is difficult in traditional non-literate cultures, although it may also be impossible in principle. Most theories within experimental social psychology have been developed using strangers as subjects in a laboratory. Social behavior of strangers is not influenced by any prior relationships they have. This is unthinkable in a traditional village. Likewise, the use of a confederate is not possible, and neither is working with hypothetical situations as this would be difficult to handle by illiterate people. On the whole, Gustav argues, there is limited "free social space" in traditional communities, which is required for experimenting (Jahoda, 1979). In Gustav's characteristic style, he is happy to illustrate his concerns with concrete examples taken from the academic literature. In

1986, he does so with a study focusing on the extent to which individuals who experience their relationship as equitable also find their sexual relationships more satisfactory (Traupman, Hatfield, and Wexler, 1983 cited in Jahoda, 1986). Predictions were based on equity theory and individuals enrolled in a human sexuality class participated. How could such a study be conducted, Gustav is asking, in a Hindu village? And what to think of assumptions underlying equity theory, so clearly embedded within an industrial culture and so unlike a traditional community? Since commonly undergraduate (American) university students are deployed in the experiments, any claim regarding universality is even further undermined.

Over the years, Gustav has repeated and strengthened his criticisms of experimental social psychology (e.g., Jahoda, 1979, 1986, 2013, 2016b). On the whole, they pertain to its assumption of universality, its focus on individuality (for example, *individuals* sitting alone in a cubicle in a *social* psychological experiment, as Gustav put it bluntly (Jahoda, 2013), its experimentalism (where subjects are manipulated rather than invited to provide their understanding of the situation (Jahoda, 2013), and its isolation from neighboring fields (outside of psychology such as anthropology, but also within psychology such as developmental psychology). With his multidisciplinary orientation, he could comment snappily on well-respected authors when they introduce their article with a question like “why do people cooperate” (Glacomantonio, De Dreu, Shalvi, Sligte, & Leder, 2010): “Such a question is very naïve, as the answer has been given by thinkers from Aristotle to Darwin: we are social animals and would not have survived without cooperation” (Jahoda, 2013, p. 5). Gustav acknowledges that many of his criticisms are not new, yet he lamented that the resistance to change their practice was so strong among social psychologists (Jahoda, 1986).

Given his call for attending to the wider context in the understanding of social behavior, Gustav leaned strongly toward a sociological social psychology, with European and non-positivistic roots rather than towards a psychological social psychology which originated in the USA and was largely experimental (Farr, 1996; Jahoda, 2007). During the 1960s, the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (EAESP, later abbreviated as EASP when the term “experimental” was dropped) was founded with an aim to develop a European social psychology that would have a comparable scientific standing as American social psychology (Moscovici & Marková, 2006). The constituting elements of such a European social psychology were that: individuals should be seen as social agents in a larger socio-structural and cultural context; social, cultural and individual variation were to be studied simultaneously, also through linking with different disciplines (Doise, 1986; Jahoda, 1986); theory and application were to be integrated while more focus was to be put on real social issues (Graumann, 1988; Jaspars, 1986; Stephenson, 1988); the laboratory experiment was to become less dominant; and a wider public was to be sampled (rather than the usual undergraduate psychology students (Jaspars, 1986)). Gustav was one of the founders of this European Association, serving as a member of the first

Planning Committee, together with Serge Moscovici, Henri Tajfel, Mauk Mulder and Jozef Nuttin. Gustav and his colleagues were very enthusiastic in fulfilling the association's ambitions and developing a truly European social psychology. Although EAESP has done much for the emancipation of social psychology in Europe and the introduction of European thinking into the USA, over time it became to resemble American-style social psychology more and more (Schruijer, 2012). Gustav tried to stimulate others to engage into cross-cultural work "but in the end I failed" (Gustav Jahoda, personal communication to Sandra Schruijer, 2007).

Historical interests

So far, we have not paid much attention to Gustav's historical analyses, on which he started publishing in the 1990s. These analyses pertained to the origin and development of concepts, notably "culture," as well as of research fields (Jahoda, 1990, 1992, 2007; Jahoda & Krewer, 1997). His great interest in the history of science was very apparent when in 2007, one of us (Sandra Schruijer) interviewed Gustav about the EAESP, and its founding context. He was intrigued by interview questions which explored the professional and political context of social psychology at the time. He had read the book by Moscovici and Marková (2008) referred to above, on how EAESP came into existence and the impact it has had.³

Reflecting on the origins of EAESP and his role in it he said that although he was enthusiastic about the whole endeavor, he had some skepticisms as he saw himself more as a cultural psychologist and as a listener. A very vocal one, as in the next minute, he shared how at the time, there was a split regarding how strictly one should stick to experimental procedures. Although he was seen as neutral, he did speak out when confronted with a paper he found utterly trivial. "I was not so blunt, but I made my opinion clear. . . They were shocked." Later in the interview Gustav mentioned that the Americans wanted to convince the Europeans that social psychology should be experimental. "There was a wish to see social psychology as a science just like physics." Experimentation was associated with science. Gustav had his reservations. "There is an inverse relationship between the rigor of an experimental method and the relevance to real life phenomena."

Gustav was receptive to questions on the larger political context in which the EAESP was founded. Politics was discussed, he said, when it concerned East European psychologists.

I went swimming with a Russian colleague and discussed a paper with him. He claimed that the Soviet Union has overcome all nationalist sentiments. I was skeptical about it. He smiled and said: "You are right." The Russians were more open, with the East Germans you could never have any contact.

At the time, Gustav was not mindful of any political backdrop to the American interest in European social psychologists, although he did feel that there may have been more behind the American generosity.

In the year of the interview, Gustav's well-received book (e.g., Minton, 2008; Sica, 2009) on the history of social psychology saw the light of day (Jahoda, 2007). This history starts with the Enlightenment and ends just before the outbreak of the Second World War, unlike other histories of social psychology that start at the beginning of the 20th-century or directly after the Second World War when "modern social psychology" was supposedly born. Although the term "social psychology" only surfaced in the 19th-century, Gustav focuses on the kind of problems that were social psychological in nature, namely "the relationships between individuals and between individuals and their society or culture" (p. 2). He describes the ideas of many thinkers (descriptions embedded in biography and context), mostly from France, Germany, Britain, and the United States, representing philosophy, anthropology, biology, economics, and other fields. Gustav's aim is "to give those concerned with social psychology a broad picture of how the subject is rooted in the past" (p. 4).

One of the reviewers of Gustav's book (Welch, 2007) was hoping for a Volume 2. He may not have known that Gustav was 86 years old when the book was published. On the other hand, ... if Welch *did* know he may also have been aware of Gustav's relentless energy and working spirit. Seven years after the interview he wrote in a mail: "I'm lacking in energy these days. What little I have is usually confined to work, which I'm determined to continue as long as I can" (Gustav Jahoda, personal communication to Sandra Schruijer, 2012). In a later email he even proposed new projects:

Am very pleased that we are firming up your visit, but in my enthusiasm have omitted to mention some caveats. Since I'm an old man, I might drop dead or suffer a lesser affliction – so there is a risk which, in fairness, I ought to mention.

But a few lines later, he writes: "It occurred to me that we might discuss the possibility of some joint work, since we have similar interests – what do you think of that?" (Gustav Jahoda, personal communication to Sandra Schruijer, 2012).

Conclusion

Can we make out Gustav's own position? He was a cross-cultural and social psychologist with respect for the need of culture-comparative analyses, sympathetic towards the concerns of cultural anthropology and classical cultural psychology (not its contemporary US American version with a focus on an East-West distinction). He definitely was a scientist, respectful of empirical facts and methods leading to objective knowledge. He was certainly not dogmatic about sources of data, going well beyond questionnaires and quasi-experimental design; he insisted on allowing space for the pursuit of knowledge with unconventional methods. Methodology was a tool to be used when needed; leading were interesting

questions or developments in the literature. His grumblings that we elaborated on largely were in defense of sound scientific analysis. This is what we have tried to capture in the title of this essay. The fact that he has turned out to be a rather critical scientist in the end may be saying more about the state of the literature and the underlying science than about his person.

Gustav Jahoda was outspoken. He reminds us of the prophets in the old testament of the bible who issued grave warnings. A proverbial characteristic of these prophets was that they were not much liked in their own time and context. We know of several colleagues who did not take too well to his admonitions. Yet Gustav rarely directed his arrows at insignificant issues. We are not aware of any work in which he took to task an insignificant paper testing a few hypotheses. His concerns were with important themes and influential authors. If indeed science is not about being right, but about trying to contribute to a common enterprise and to be continually corrected in this process, being the target of Gustav's criticisms can be seen as a mark of distinction. When he challenged someone's writings they were apparently deemed to be of influence. However, he differed on one essential point from the old prophets who had strong opinions not only on what was wrong but also on what was right. Gustav's analyses are much more about what he saw as questionable than about what he saw as valid. In his legacy, there is no "theory of Jahoda" and thus no explicit set of ideas that he had to defend. In the sequence of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, he did not really arrive at a synthesis. We see this as a reflection of his wisdom; in the fields where he was active, there may not (yet) be a fund of accumulated knowledge that can carry strong or final theoretical constructions.

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Notes

1. Of course, the emic-etic dichotomy has survived comfortably the onslaughts by Jahoda. However, we like to note that his objections have rarely been addressed: if easy to counter, more authors might have liked to score points.
2. A point to note is that Moscovici kept the tone of the debate civil, despite Gustav's outspoken critique.
3. Gustav, how could it be otherwise, had immediately something critical (and funny) to say about the book. Moscovici and Marková depict the beautiful surroundings of Sorrento where the first conference was held, back in December 1963. They speak of flowering oranges and lemons, as well as the "brisk breeze" and "warm sunshine." Gustav

remarked: "In December it was utterly miserable... December! Rain was pouring down... Oranges...? In December??" It set the tone for an inspiring and lovely afternoon.

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Author biographies

Ype H. Poortinga is Emeritus Professor of cross-cultural psychology at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, and at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. His most consistent research interest has been in the methodology of cross-cultural comparison of psychological data. His empirical research has dealt with a variety of topics in culture-comparative research, including information transmission, basic personality variables and emotions, as well as social psychological variables in societies as far apart as Southern Africa, India, Indonesia and Mexico. His experience in applied fields includes intercultural training, test development and adaptation, and program evaluation. His children fondly remember Gustav's visits over weekends during the year he spent at the NIAS (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies) and during a guest professorship at Tilburg University.

Sandra G.L. Schruijer is a Professor of Organization Sciences at the Utrecht University School of Governance and Professor of Organizational Psychology at Tias School for Business and Society, Tilburg University, both in The Netherlands.